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Frantic Waiting: NGO Anti-Politics and “Timepass” for Young Syrian Refugees in Jordan

Ann-Christin Wagner

Drawing on Sukarieh and Tannock’s political economy of youth approach, this paper explores how Syrian *refugee youth* is constituted in protracted displacement in Jordan. It investigates a juvenile population often overlooked in Forced Migration Studies, disenfranchised rural Syrians, who fail to develop practices of youthfulness, yet in exile are subjected to alternative productions of *youth* by the aid sector. Depoliticized NGO youth programming overlooks Syrians’ limited access to the labor market and higher

education. While educational trainings aim to produce entrepreneurial and citizen refugees, they ultimately contribute to the creation of *timepass* and precarious lives. This research is grounded in 2016/17 of ethnographic fieldwork with Syrian refugees in a border town in northern Jordan.

Keywords: Syrian refugee crisis; Jordan; rural livelihoods; urban displacement; NGO youth politics; timepass

Introduction

Having “reeked of lives on hold”, is how Betts and Collier recently described refugee existence in Zaatari camp, Jordan, evoking standard tropes of displacement-induced waiting (viii).

Yet, contrary to common depictions of refugees as immobilized and passive, I found young Syrian refugees in Mafraq, a Jordanian town a mere 10 miles away from the Syrian border, to be surprisingly busy with studying English, Quran and IT, sewing and hairdressing courses, even a wedding photography class. Offered by local churches and mosques as well as Jordanian and international NGOs, these programs kept my informants occupied on most days. As many of them lasted no longer than a week, young refugees would complete one course after another, exchanging information about upcoming educational offers with their peers on WhatsApp and accumulating official-looking *certificates*, usually issued by humanitarian agencies themselves.

Yet, over time, I began to have my suspicions about the ultimate value of so much bustle. As Jordan is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention on refugees, Syrians in the country are subjected to the same labor migration regulations as other migrants. Limited access to the formal

labor market – restricted to low-skilled jobs and requiring work permits difficult to obtain – and to higher education makes it unlikely that young Syrians could put newly acquired skills to use in the near future (Lenner). As a Syrian woman jokingly remarked to me: “We learn English so we can receive foreign [NGO] visitors.”

The obvious mismatch between NGO programming and young Syrians’ exclusion from the formal economy in Jordan led me to question both the humanitarians’ and young people’s motivations for engaging in what seemed like an endless loop of educational training of all sorts. In doing so, I rediscovered the “strangeness of improvement” of other people’s lives (Li 3). Eventually, challenging NGOs’ youth politics made me reconsider the meaning of *youth* itself. In offering training explicitly advertised for *young* Syrians, what kind of *youth* did NGOs have in mind?

Conceptually, this paper draws inspiration from two bodies of literature. First, in investigating productions of *youth*, I rely on Sukarieh and Tannock’s *political economy of youth* approach. Instead of taking *youth* as given, I ask how *youth* as a social category is constituted. However, a political economy of youth is not limited to an analysis of youngsters’ economic rela-

tions; rather, it brings into view how a complex web of circumstances – economic, social, and cultural – transforms, or fails to transform, young people as an age cohort into *youth*.

Second, to make sense of how Western NGOs produce Syrian *youth* as a humanitarian object which they can subsequently act upon, this research positions itself in the continuity of postcolonial critiques of development. Putting to use Foucault’s seminal concept of discourse as *practice* (cf. Hall), postcolonial scholars have investigated how institutionalised knowledge productions are imbued with power and have material effects. Demonstrating how *Others* are constituted as objects of knowledge that states can discipline and govern, (e.g. Bhabha; Hall; Said and many others), they have highlighted the embeddedness of cultural representations in histories of colonialism, slavery and imperialism. While this paper can only allude to the rich tradition of thought, it takes seriously Spivak’s objection to postcolonial intellectuals’ ambitions to restore the subalterns’ voice: while first-world critiques remain entangled in hegemonic ways of speaking, attempts at passing the mic to the *working class*, *Indian women*, and other marginalized people overlook the heterogeneous nature of these groups.

Hence, this paper does not claim to juxtapose humanitarian endeavours with *what young Syrian refugees really want*. Rather, it brings to the fore longstanding histories of dispossession, while concerning itself with the ways in which young aid beneficiaries are silenced through gendered and class-based violence, but also through humanitarian project design in exile.

When it comes to development interventions, “the colonial notion of European superiority” lingers in the subdivision of the world into more or less developed countries; Western capitalist economies and consumer societies are held up as the universal ideal of humanity (Ziai 128). In this paper, I demonstrate how humanitarian action attempts to forge neoliberal model refugees, overlooking the after-effects of economic disenfranchisement in pre-war Syria and power differentials between Syrian refugees and aid workers in Jordan. This line of thought owes a great deal to Ferguson’s (*The Anti-Politics*) seminal study of rural development projects in Lesotho, where he resorts to Foucauldian discourse theory to demonstrate the – often unforeseen – material consequences of development discourse. As NGOs and international organizations invent Lesotho as an isolated subsistence economy, ignoring its longstanding

embeddedness in regional economies and migration circuits, mismatched agricultural schemes fall short of reducing poverty, leading to the expansion of state bureaucracy instead. Pursuing *development* as a depoliticized project, international organizations fail to account for existing power relations that shape Lesotho's economy, overlooking the role of corrupt bureaucratic elites and painting an undifferentiated picture of the aid-receiving people. Li points out a more fundamental "contradiction between difference and improvement" (14-5): While the development industry aims at ameliorating aid beneficiaries' living conditions, making them *more like us*, it crucially depends on constituting them as less developed *others* in order to retain them as objects of interventions and, ultimately, justify its *raison d'être*. Aid beneficiaries are thus relegated to the "waiting room of history", never quite developed enough to govern themselves (Chakrabarty 8).

Finally, I paint a picture of the humanitarian landscape in Mafrq, Jordan, not as a civil society alternative to neoliberal states, but rather as deeply embedded in market-based logics. To this purpose, the exponential growth of NGOs since the 1990s needs to be briefly situated within a wider transition towards "the neoliberal restruc-

turing of capitalism" (Hirsch 10). While neoliberalism refers to a macro-economic doctrine centered on private enterprise, free markets and a retraction of the welfare state, it also entails blurring the very boundaries between the private and the public sector through the intrusion of "new, market-based techniques of government within the terrain of the state itself" (Ferguson, "The Uses of Neoliberalism" 172), including the outsourcing of social services to NGOs (Harvey). However, the shrinking of the state *from within* also comes with its internationalization, through an increasing reliance on international financial markets and the expansion of international organizations (Hirsch); hence, I found myself working for a European NGO in a Middle Eastern backwater. Yet NGOs usually continue to be contingent on funding from governmental agencies and on the legislative and executive frameworks of states within which they operate. They also lack democratic structures on the inside and often fail to give a voice to those they claim to represent (Hirsch, "The State's New Clothes"). Humanitarian engagement of multinational companies, as in the form of *philanthrocapitalism*, is a more extreme example of how private sector actors pursue technocratic, top-down

approaches to development based on business models (Wilson).

In the footsteps of Ferguson (*The Anti-Politics*), I thus provide a case study of young Syrian refugees in the Jordanian province for whom pre-war dispossession and cross-border displacement in Jordan have rendered youthful lifestyles inaccessible. I go on to show how development discourse – particular representations of young Syrians – translates into concrete development practices: NGOs in Mafrq, Jordan, constitute young Syrian refugees as a *lost generation*, i.e. a humanitarian object worthy of intervention. Projecting Western models of adolescence upon them, they provide Syrian beneficiaries with a variety of learning opportunities. Yet, in striking contrast to widespread appreciations of Middle Eastern youth as political actors during the Arab Spring, Mafrq-based NGOs aim to produce an apolitical, entrepreneurial refugee *youth*, in line with wider neoliberal agendas. However, NGO youth programming in Mafrq does not achieve what it sets out to do: in the absence of long-term employment perspectives for young Syrians, NGO-channelled youth engagement becomes a sort of time pass, compensating for the lack of access to higher education and dignified labor, while also

justifying NGOs' ongoing engagement in the Syrian refugee crisis. Humanitarian actors also accidentally create new opportunities and spaces for *becoming youth*. Eventually, this leads us to reconsider the production of precarious lives for young people in the Middle East and beyond.

In doing so, I hope to help fill two conceptual gaps in Forced Migration and Development Studies. First, while there is a sizeable amount of research on children in conflict (e.g. Boyden and De Berry; Hart, *Years of Conflict*), the situation of displaced adolescents has been understudied (Chatty, "Researching Refugee Youth"). In particular, it is rarely asked how humanitarian intervention *forges* certain types of refugee youth, notable exceptions being Fiddian-Qasmiyeh's study of the role of transnational care for Sahrawi children in reproducing a nation-in-exile (e.g. Crivello and Fiddian-Qasmiyeh) and a desktop study on making *citizens* of returning refugee youth in Angola (Auerbach).

Second, recent studies on young Arabs tend to focus on the predicaments of urban middle-class youth, especially endemic graduate unemployment. Unable to secure economic livelihoods, many Arab men cannot afford to pay the considerable costs of marriage and hous-

ing (Singerman; Dhillon, Dyer and Yousef; Joseph; Brown et al.). As they fail to achieve markers of social adulthood, young men become stuck in a liminal state of *waithood*, somewhere between being children and grown-ups (Mulderig). Much has been said about this generation-in-waiting's transformative potential for social and political reforms and its role in the revolutions of the Arab Spring (e.g. Honwana), often with a special focus on youngsters' creative use of social media for formulating new modes of civic engagement (Herrera). Yet, *waithood* is something that young people need to be able to afford – it requires certain resources, including parental support and educational capital. What about young rural, distinctively non-middle class populations prevented from becoming part of youth movements not only by virtue of living far away from major cities, but also because of their low level of education?

This paper draws on one year of ethnographic fieldwork in 2016 and a two-month follow-up study in summer 2017 in Mafraq, a mid-sized provincial town in the north of Jordan, as part of doctoral research on Syrian refugees' mobilities and *waiting* experiences in exile. Since early 2012, Mafraq's cityscape has been reshaped by the massive influx of Syrian refugees.

While exact figures vary between 80,000 (UNHCR) and 100,000 new Syrian inhabitants (Mafraq Mayor Ahmed Hawamdeh, Personal Communication, April 2016), i.e. roughly 50 percent of Mafraq's current population, this makes Mafraq one of the urban centers most affected by the refugee influx (CARE).

Mafraq's Lost Generation (in Hiding)

W.'s fate is symptomatic of many young Syrians in Mafraq. One night, she proudly produces a yellowed picture that shows her hiding in an olive grove, a shy teenager in a formal school uniform – a stint in school she fondly recalls, but which ended too soon when, at the age of 15, she joined her large family to work in a chicken farm on the outskirts of Aleppo. In 2009, the family started coming to Mafraq and the nearby Jordan Valley regularly for work in agriculture. When the Syrian civil war broke out, the family moved to Jordan on a permanent basis, capitalizing on old employment networks to find – increasingly scarce – work. When I first meet W., now in her early twenties, she spends most of her time confined to her parents' flat, occasionally interrupted by weeks of hard labor in the field, usually in the company of her father and unmarried sisters.

Unsurprisingly, Mafraq's refugee population is very young. In a recent survey in Mafraq Governorate, CARE found that 50 percent of Syrian respondents were under 18. However, beyond their demographic significance, young Syrians have also been constituted as a prime object of humanitarian and media attention, more specifically, as a *lost generation*, an expression forged by international media (Brown; Latonero; Mednick; Paton; Sinjab; Yahia and Zreik, and many others). By way of illustration, a 16-year-old girl from Damascus, living in a refugee camp in the north of Iraq, is quoted as: "My adolescence... Maybe it was taken" (Akaja). In a similar vein, a photo essay for CNN describes a married 15-year old Syrian girl with one child of her own as: "Marwa was a woman who had lost her childhood" (Patterson). This approach is also reflected in the UNHCR's *No Lost Generation* initiative, launched in 2013 and focusing on education and child protection. While childhood and adolescence seem to be somewhat confused in most reports, the loss at stake usually refers to obstacles to continuing one's education and its consequences, such as child labor and early marriage. Furthermore, young people are often presented as *psychologically damaged, traumatized, suffering from PTSD*, etc.

In my own volunteering work with Syrian children in Mafraq, I witnessed numerous NGO-led attempts at creating *child-friendly spaces, bringing back childhood, let children be children*, etc., through activities thought to be appropriate for children, such as visits to the zoo, school camps and so on. Psychosocial support for children offered by local and international organizations also speaks to an understanding of Syrian youth as *damaged*.

However, as if echoing foreign media and humanitarians' obsession with young Syrian refugees' loss of childhood and adolescence, being *young* did not seem to resonate with my Syrian informants in Mafraq. While designations such as *bint* (girl, young woman) and *shāb* (young man) are widely used, they are solely understood with regard to marital status, not age. Moreover, young Syrians in Mafraq fail to do what young people in Jordanian cities *usually* do: wearing fashionable Western-style clothes (or at least moderate Islamic dress), attending university and gathering in shopping malls and coffee shops. While they certainly use mobile phones to communicate with friends like young Jordanians do, they mostly employ them for staying in touch with relatives in Syria or abroad, as well as with aid agencies in town.

As time went by, I started to wonder what it meant to be *young* and displaced in a messy urban environment such as Mafraq, having my suspicions about appropriate analytical categories. While there were certainly a lot of *young people* around, is it possible that *youth* simply did not exist?

To make sense of this apparent contradiction, I suggest going back to Bayat's ("Muslim Youth") distinction between *young persons* as an age cohort and *youth* as a social category. The latter is conceived of as a modern urban phenomenon and distinguished by "youthfulness", "a particular habitus, behavioral and cognitive dispositions that are associated with the fact of being "young" – that is, a distinct social location between childhood and adulthood, where the youngster experiences 'relative autonomy'" (Bayat, "Muslim Youth" 28; cf. Sukarieh and Tannock). In particular, being *youth* comes with "a greater tendency for experimentation, adventurism, idealism, autonomy, mobility, and change" (Bayat, "Muslim Youth" 30). Access to education, free time activities, leisure mobility, and mixed-gender socializing are all formative experiences for experiencing *youth*. Moreover, for *young people* to turn into *youth*, they need to reclaim *youthfulness*. Yet, these claims are not realized via institutions and

organized social movements, but rather through the formation of “passive networks” (Bayat, “Muslim Youth” 31), e.g. via shared fashion styles, symbols and meeting places, and exerting one’s presence in public. Perhaps unsurprisingly, according to this definition, most young Syrians in Mafraq have never been *youth*. Yet humanitarian actors in Mafraq set up various educational programs, assuming that the category of *youth* is meaningful to their beneficiaries.

Humanitarians’ Quest for the Universal (White) Child

That NGOs in Mafraq seem to find Syrian *youth* everywhere is the result of a two-fold misrepresentation: the humanitarian sector’s blindness towards non-Western models of childhood and adolescence, as well as its ignorance of a specific history of dispossession which has shaped rural Syrians’ access to *youthfulness*.

In truth, educating young people often presupposes an understanding of youngsters as *tabula rasa*. Hart (“Saving children”; *Years of Conflict*) and Chatty (“Palestinian Refugee Youth”) draw attention to prevailing Western models of childhood in child- and youth-focused humanitarianism, retracing how *children* became objects of study and humanitarian con-

cern, from the earliest League of Nations’ Declaration of Children’s Rights (1924) until the seminal UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). What pertains to my analysis is how humanitarian understanding of *childhood* and *youth* are informed by Piagetian models of developmental stages, constituting them “as a phase of life that was special, carefree and distinct from adulthood” (Hart, “Saving children” 6). It is noteworthy, though, that the universalised and depoliticised view of young people which often characterises humanitarian intervention is symptomatic of a wider process of dehistoricization and depoliticization of aid recipients (cf. Ferguson, *The Anti-Politics Machine*). This leaves little room for individual – and often conflicting – displacement narratives (Malkki).

In Mafraq, there is plenty of evidence that the *youth* NGOs have in mind is modelled after Western models of adolescence, with extended schooling and no involvement in (waged) labor. UNICEF’s Makani centers, but also a local church and other small NGOs in Mafraq, offer elementary education to younger and older children out of school. However, different outlooks of parents and educators often clash: when a local Save the Children learning center started to pay parents a small

monthly amount, it created strong expectations among Syrian parents to receive compensation for their offspring’s school attendance. While many NGO workers, especially Western foreigners, were scandalized, they failed to grasp a simple truth: that in Syrian families of rural background, minors have always constituted a valuable resource and contributed to the family income.

The dreams aid workers encourage students to indulge in are equally telling. While volunteering with a small Western NGO’s informal education project, I heard teenagers being groomed to envision themselves as doctors, teachers and engineers, regardless of their parents’ non-existent financial and educational resources and structural obstacles to higher education in Jordan.

The unfitness of humanitarians’ conceptualizations of *youth* for capturing Syrians’ life worlds led me to adopt a *class lens*: while NGO programs prepare young beneficiaries for Western middle-class life models, they overlook the socioeconomic background of their target group. In particular, they fail to grasp that young Syrians’ survival mechanisms – including child labor and early marriage – cannot be attributed to displacement solely. Rather,

they have long been a part of rural households' coping mechanisms based on the contribution of all family members, including minors. The life story of my friend W., whom we encountered earlier in this paper, reveals that even before 2011, hard physical labor and little education, but also frequent circular cross-border mobility, were the norm, rather than the exception, for many young Syrians from the lower classes.

While most academic and NGO research to this day explains displacement patterns during the Syrian civil war through tribal and family networks, I argue that what brought my informants to Mafraq are longstanding pre-war labor migration ties. Mostly small-scale farmers and recently sedentary Bedouins from remote rural areas in the Homs and Aleppo governorates – regions with high rates of poverty and illiteracy –, they frequently engaged in short-term seasonal migration to work in agriculture and construction in the Bekaa Valley, Beirut and Mafraq before 2011. As in other regions in the Middle East, circular mobility helped to complement income from farming and keep precarious rural livelihoods afloat (cf. De Haas), insecure existences compounded by large-scale agricultural reform, and, more recently, neoliberal projects in Syria (Azmeah). Far

from being cosmopolitan travellers, informants took part in highly circumscribed, translocal mobility schemes – as one Syrian woman put it, “Mafraq was the only place we knew in the world”.

Devoid of other resources – economic, social, and educational – my informants' ability to move and access menial employment networks in the Levant was thus their only asset (Van Hear). Seasonal labor migration was facilitated by open state borders, a phenomenon well documented for Syrian labor migrants in Lebanon (Chalcraft), but also labor-receiving countries' migration policies (De Bel-Air). While Jordan depends on foreign labor for low-skilled jobs in agriculture and the construction sector, it also assures that their migrant workers' stay remains temporary, by keeping them in legal limbo. Forced into irregularity, rural Syrians often moved under the radar of state authority and did not appear in regional migration statistics.

After 2011, when the Syrian Civil War pushed rural populations out of their regions of origin, entire village communities, often bound together by kinship ties, managed to capitalize on transnational connections previously established by some of its members, to seek refuge, employment and housing abroad. Syrians

often left their villages of origin in a hurry when fleeing from the regime bombings, without further preparations or the time to gather their belongings. However, anecdotal evidence from Mafraq suggests that some Jordanian employers proactively reached out to former Syrian farm workers, inviting them back on their lands.

When state borders eventually hardened, circular, menial migration patterns were disrupted, turning formerly mobile labor migrants into refugees. Hence, contrary to common humanitarian beliefs, low educational levels, child labor and early marriage are not a direct result of *becoming refugees*, but have long been a feature of insecure lives in pre-war rural Syria. Economic pressure aside, deeply rooted survival strategies at least partly explain why Syrian refugees keep engaging in practices punishable by Jordanian law and despite manifold incentives by aid agencies to keep children in school and out of the labor and marriage market.

This said, precarious lifestyles that render youthful behavior in Bayat's (“Muslim Youth”) sense almost impossible are exacerbated by cross-border displacement to Jordan. The threat of deportation to Jordanian refugee camps and even Syria for working without a proper permit

pushes men into invisibility, while fuelling child labor (Human Rights Watch). As I learned from my friend W., women and children as young as 10 years old, known to be less targeted by labor patrols, often work long hours in agriculture around Mafraq, earning as little as 5 JD (ca. 6 EUR) a day. During the agricultural season, W. and her sisters were picked up by a bus at 4 am and did not return home until the late afternoon. The strenuous work – picking fruits on the field and sorting products into pallets, often in the blazing sun, rudely pushed forward by Egyptian foremen – would frequently make her teenage sister faint. In addition, although governmental schools in Mafraq run double shifts, overall schooling rates for Syrian children are low. Many students drop out of education at an early age because they have to provide for their families (for boys) or because of widespread sexual harassment (for girls), making them lose out on schooling as a formative experience for extending adolescence and establishing peer networks.

Finally, the shortage of opportunities for *youthful behavior* is compounded by Mafraq's missing metropolitan identity; despite its urban appearance, it is hardly a *real* city at all. Given the lack of public facilities and its tight-knit tribal society,

people's lives take place behind closed doors and in the company of family members.

A comparison with Proudfoot's research on Syrian rebel-workers in Lebanon sheds further light on my informants' failure to develop a *youthful* habitus. Before 2011, Proudfoot's young rural informants sought work in construction and restaurants in Beirut to generate remittances for families back home, while simultaneously acquiring a degree from a local Lebanese university. Yet, they also eagerly adopted a Beirut cosmopolitan identity, showing off (fake) Western-style clothes, exercising, and dating Lebanese women. When the Syrian civil war broke out, they took a pro-active stance in the conflict and, for some of them, even joined the fight back home.

Their attempts at being visible in Beirut's public life, as well as their later mobilization in the Syrian civil war, are reminiscent of Bayat's description of youth movements, formed on the basis of shared consumption patterns and leisure time activities, ultimately through the mere "art of presence" (Bayat, "Politics" 125), in public space.

Naturally, my informants' lives in Mafraq differ greatly from these successful attempts at youthfulness and political

mobilization. While having migrated as part of family units severely limits their freedom of movement, economic pressure, Jordanian labor patrols and the extremely conservative, tribal and gender-segregated environment in Mafraq make it impossible for young Syrians to exert their presence in public or socialize with people their age outside their immediate family, preconditions to becoming *youth*.

Superwomen, Start-Up Entrepreneurs and Good Citizens – Producing Humanitarian Fantasies

Nine months into our friendship, W. asks me to visit her at an NGO course on removing landmines. Previously, I have come to know her as a conservative young woman who wears the face veil and does not take taxis on her own for fear of interacting with strangers. Yet, to my great surprise, I now watch her chat freely with the male Jordanian instructor. Some days later, she spreads out the newly obtained certificates on the carpet in her parents' living room, proudly handing me one after the other. Her enthusiasm is moving, reminding me of the earnest look on the school girl's face in her sole childhood picture. W., who has never worked outside the family network, suddenly dreams about working for an NGO and contributing to Syria's reconstruction after the war.

While long at the margins of humanitarian attention – the UNHCR office in Mafraq only opened in 2014, while Syrian refugees started arriving as early as January 2012 – Mafraq has slowly emerged as a provincial humanitarian hub. In the initial absence of inter-agency cooperation, numerous aid agencies, including faith-based charities, often replicate existing services, creating rifts within the refugee community while also distorting local economies through untargeted donations (cf. Dickinson). Given that most Syrians do not work on a regular basis, they heavily rely on aid supplies, but also spend much of their free time taking part in NGO classes. Financial compensation for food and transportation is another strong incentive for signing up for these classes. As A., a Syrian university student in his mid-twenties, explains to me, he earns about 250 JD (ca. 302 EUR) a month as a volunteer with various organizations, enabling him to pay the rent for his entire family – fifty JD more than he gained working up to sixteen hours a day in a local supermarket.

However, what I am concerned with in the last part of this paper goes beyond the immediate economic benefits of NGO engagement for young Syrians. In the introduction, I outlined how NGOs' depen-

dence on state funding and legal frameworks, as well as the professionalization of aid, make it more difficult to present them as a morally superior civil society alternative to retreating welfare states. Another aspect of the intertwinement of humanitarian and neoliberal agendas is the latter's often-overlooked role in shaping the way we perceive everyday reality and ourselves. Ferguson ("The Uses of Neoliberalism") reminds us that in the Foucauldian sense, neoliberalism also refers to "techniques of government that work through the creation of responsabilized citizen-subjects" – the production of the rational *homo economicus*, carefully weighing risks and operating "as a miniature firm" (172). In other words, neoliberal capitalism as a hegemonic mode of discourse also produces certain *subjectivities*, or, in McGuigan's words, "neoliberal selfhoods" (224). As examples, he quotes "successful entrepreneurs", "youthful billionaires" and "celebrities". *A priori*, young destitute refugees seem to be cast out from the neoliberal charade, being prevented from spending, building careers and individualized lifestyles. Still, I argue that NGO youth politics in Mafraq are a prime battlefield for turning disenfranchised non-youthful youngsters into model refugees of a certain kind, i.e. a neoliberal refugee youth.

Importantly, Syrian refugee *women* play a significant role in these educational programs. Gender equality has been mainstreamed in humanitarian action for the last 20 years, branding refugee men as pre-modern perpetrators of domestic violence, powerful gatekeepers within the refugee community or emasculated troublemakers (Olivius, "Displacing Equality?"; "Refugeemen").

At the same time, humanitarian programs obey neoliberal governmentalities, more focused on heightening interventions' efficiency than tackling underlying power relations and structural inequalities. Following this logic, displaced women are co-opted into aid programs because they are considered *better* refugees, i.e. more family-oriented, cooperative, and reliable than men.

In my own fieldwork, I witnessed many NGOs, both international and local, courting female refugees. Many training programs specifically target young Syrian women by offering traditionally *female* skills such as tailoring, hairdressing and cooking, or requiring participation on a daily basis that working men cannot commit to. While this reflects the reality of numerous female-headed households in Mafraq, it overlooks culturally specific divisions of labor and structural inequalities that Syrian men are subjected to, including

heightened security checks, exploitative labor and deportation threats. In plain words, refugee women are turned into micro-level entrepreneurs able to procure for themselves and their families, as evidenced by numerous home-based work programs for refugee women and the provision of working equipment.

By way of illustration, my friend W. was once given a hairdryer by a European NGO. Yet, while W. eagerly indulged in daydreams of new career prospects, she lacked both the vocational skills and a proper work permit to find employment in a local hair salon. Moreover, the limited surface of her family's apartment hardly offered any space to start a business of her own - a difficulty compounded by severe gender restrictions prohibitive to house visits of female clients. Hence, although a well-meant gift, a hairdryer did not make a professional hairdresser yet.

Moreover, NGO training funded by Western countries often seems to reflect donor interests more than the situation of refugees in the Levant. In late summer 2016, a German political foundation came to Mafraq for a one-day crash course on democratic institutions. A mixed group of two dozen young Syrians, with educational levels anywhere between primary school and university education, eagerly

engaged in heated debates, guided by highly motivated Syrian trainers their age. Yet there was a striking mismatch between participants' goodwill and opportunities for political participation in Jordan, let alone Syria. This led me to question the value of *citizenship* as a concept in development work: reclaiming refugee integration makes little sense when even Jordanian *citizens* lack civil and political rights. Against this backdrop, NGO programming seemed to reflect ongoing debates about civil society inclusion of Syrian refugees at the municipal level *in Germany*, i.e. in a radically dissimilar policy environment (for an example of comparable workshops with refugees in Germany see Tribowski) - a prime example of how even political education can become depoliticized.

Finally, while an emancipatory effect of NGO trainings in Mafraq cannot be denied, it needs to be contextualized as part of a neoliberal endeavor to create highly mobile (preferably female) subjects. However, NGOs and Syrian recipients often have different understandings of proximity and reasonable distance, a case in point of how well-meant humanitarian interventions overlook existing restrictions on female mobility in public space. For example, the Western NGO I

volunteered with offered English courses outside the city center, encouraging young Syrian women to venture out on their own. Sadly, the initiative backfired, with numerous participants dropping out of the course because of the distance perceived as unwalkable.

Still, it cannot be denied that getting involved in humanitarian work does have the potential to increase Syrian women's range of movement, both in the literal and the figurative sense (cf. Chick, for refugee women in Lebanon). In fact, many young Syrians in Mafraq appreciate opportunities for rare mixed-gender sociability within NGO facilities, often rendered tolerable to watchful parents by the prospect of additional humanitarian assistance. My friend W. found it acceptable to take off her face veil and interact with male volunteers in the office of a local NGO she often visited for training, and even for mere hanging out with fellow students. Over time, her younger sisters and even her parents began to regularly join her at the premises, building a close relationship between the family and the NGO's Jordanian director. Moreover, volunteering with charities presents a rare occasion for mingling with local youth. As A., the student mentioned above, highlights, Syrian-Jordanian friendships forged in

NGO offices often lead to mutual visits and shared leisure activities, such as barbecues, visits to coffee shops and the gym – all of them reserved for men.

Sadly, in the end, NGO courses are often no more than a short, pleasant interlude before marriage and childcare take their toll. When I visit W. in summer 2017, she has become the second wife of an older Syrian from Raqqa, himself a migrant worker in Jordan before the war. Newly pregnant and locked into her husband's tiny apartment in Ma'an, a highly conservative town in the south of Jordan, she is terribly bored and greatly misses her regular visits to the Jordanian NGO center in Mafraq.

Conclusion: Aborted Neoliberal Subjectivities and Timepass

This article set off by countering common representations of refugees as being stuck in space and in their lives, portraying the manifold NGO-led activities provided to young Syrian refugees in Mafraq, a result of the presence of multiple aid agencies on the ground. Taking Ferguson's (*The Anti-Politics*) critique of the humanitarian "anti-politics machine" as a blueprint for my own analysis, it demonstrated how NGOs constitute young Syrians as humanitarian objects, subsequently carving out

spaces and opportunities for *youthful* behavior for a population of youngsters who, due to longstanding disenfranchisement at home and in Jordan, have never really been *young* before. Still, due to restrictive migrant labor regimes in Jordan, they ultimately fail to produce young entrepreneurs, good citizens and independent women, i.e. the apolitical *neoliberal subjectivities* humanitarians have in mind.

On a final note, the mixed success of NGO youth programs in Mafraq invites more general reflections about the type of *waiting* marginalized youth find themselves in. Comparative evidence comes from Jeffrey's study of lower middle-class men in northern India who have the resources to acquire higher education, but lack the social capital to find matching jobs. In the meantime, they keep accumulating – eventually useless – university diplomas, while also developing "timepass cultures" of their own, such as exerting their presence in the public sphere through performing hyper-masculinities (Jeffrey 475). Notwithstanding their potential for bringing about political reform and innovative lifestyles, timepass, in the end, "was what one had to do because more meaningful ways of engaging with the world were unavailable" (Jeffrey 471). It seems all too

easy to draw parallels to the situation of young Syrians in Mafraq who, despite amassing home-made NGO certificates, keep being excluded from the formal labor market and higher education. That they fail to make themselves visible on Mafraq's streets, instead preferring to go unnoticed, can be ascribed to the legal limbo and deportation threat they find themselves in.

Yet, while failing to yield ideal-typical neoliberal subjectivities, the aid sector unintentionally reproduces a youth experience characteristic of the globalized world in which flexible labor markets demand easily disposable workforces. Thus, displaced or not, many highly educated youth find themselves in a situation of recurring short-term contracts and training, ongoing job insecurity, lacking career opportunities and thus perpetual existential insecurity (Standing). Quite fittingly, what is striking about Jordan is the coexistence of other young populations with starkly different socioeconomic profiles, yet equally prone to *timepass*. In a country where almost every fifth university graduate is unemployed (Middle East Monitor), the humanitarian sector has grown into one of the biggest employers for young locals – often retaining them on short-term contracts for years. For the displaced and

Ann-Christin Wagner

is a PhD candidate in International Development at the University of Edinburgh and associated with the IFPO Amman's LAJEH project. During Trinity Term 2017, she was a Visiting Fellow at the Refugee Studies Centre, University of Oxford. In 2018, she will spend three months at the Centre de Recherches Internationales at Sciences Po, Paris. Prior to her doctoral studies, she worked with the International Organization for Migration in Geneva. In 2016/17, Ann conducted 14 months of ethnographic fieldwork with rural Syrian refugees in a border town in the north of Jordan; she is interested in how Syrians' (im) mobilities in exile are shaped by pre-war labor migration and the humanitarian action.

email: ann-christin.wagner@ed.ac.uk

locals alike, keeping oneself busy coincides with forever delayed meaningful futures. Yet stark class differences make that young Jordanians and Syrians in Mafraq experience *waiting* in different ways: while the former can afford lives of leisure in shopping malls and coffeeshops, the latter are constantly on the move, struggling to get by on a combination of odd jobs and humanitarian assistance – *frantic* waiting instead of idleness. Ultimately, while this article took a critical stance towards NGOs' entanglement with neoliberal policies, it might be time for critics to go beyond denunciatory analyses (Ferguson, "The Uses of Neoliberalism"). Ferguson's (*Give a Man a Fish*) most recent work is thus concerned with carving out pro-poor policies *within* neoliberal frameworks, taking as a starting point the encroachment of market-based economies in the Global South which has paradoxically been accompanied by an *expansion* of social assistance programs. As countries like South Africa have transitioned from a situation of labor shortage to a massive labor surplus, this leaves huge populations, including HIV orphans and widows, but also young men fit to work, without realistic opportunities for integrating into the labor market. Ferguson thus investigates the mobilizing potential of basic income grants for these popula-

tions. The caveat of this approach is that it is coupled to citizenship; yet these social experiments cannot fail to remind us of the situation of hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees in Jordan surviving on a combination of humanitarian assistance and irregular work in the informal economy. Amidst the extension of work permits in low-skilled sectors to Syrian refugees in Jordan (ILO), there are currently (summer 2017) rumors about a downscaling of the UNHCR cash assistance program, following significant funding cuts in the WFP's food voucher scheme in 2014 (Achilli). While there is no denying the benefits of granting Syrian refugees access to education and formalizing Syrian labor, which shields refugees from legal insecurity and exploitative working conditions, access to the formal labor market accompanied by *decreased* protection seems an unrealistic scenario in a country characterized by a largely informalized economy and widespread graduate unemployment. Hence, we might grudgingly have to accept that in the foreseeable future, handing out cash to *most* of the displaced might be the only way to help Syrian refugees to stay afloat.

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